

February 6, 1998

Broncos & Packers, Senators & Representatives

Are We Spending Too Much on Politics?

133 million American viewers watched the Denver Broncos defeat the Green Bay Packers in last month's Super Bowl, placing it third (behind two other Super Bowls) on the list of most-watched programs in television history.

The game was interrupted periodically so that those same 133 million viewers could see very expensive commercials. (Happily, this was not one of those years in which the commercials were more exciting than the game.) Here in the RPC consumer affairs and visual arts division, we have awarded medals to our favorites:

- The gold medal goes to Budweiser for its series of ads featuring Louie the Lizard. "Never hire a ferret," Louie said, "to do a weasel's job." This adage is already appearing on the business cards of trial lawyers and political consultants.
- The silver medal goes to McIlhenny's Tabasco Sauce for its exploding mosquito.
- And in a controversial decision, the bronze medal goes to Continental Tire for having its spokesman spin a cardboard cutout of one of its products.

Honorable mentions in this high stakes commercial-arts festival went to Pepsi Cola for its sky surfer with goose; to VISA for its little girl and elephant; and to American Express for Superman and Seinfeld.

Super Bowl commercials are the most expensive in the business. This year it cost a cool \$1.3 million to buy 30 seconds of ad time. Of course, a commercial must be produced before it can be broadcast, and production costs often run into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

\$1.3 million buys exposure to 133 million Americans for 30 seconds: That's less than a penny per person. No wonder, then, that some of America's smartest pitchmen bought \$100 million in advertising slots for this year's broadcast (which included pre-game and post-game shows) and \$107 million for last year's show.

\$207 million over two years is a whole lot of money to spend on a football game, but this is the level of spending that is required when competing speakers are trying to persuade a vast television audience.

During the past two Super Bowls (1997 and 1998), America's advertisers bought \$207 million of ad time that was inserted into about 12 hours of broadcasting. It can be instructive to compare that amount of money with the money that was spent during the most recent election cycle (1995-96):

- All 143 U.S. Senate candidates (vying for 34 seats) raised \$223 million *from all sources*.
- The U.S. Treasury gave \$211 million *in public funds* to 11 presidential candidates.
- All PACs gave a combined total of \$201 million to *all federal candidates*.

There are those who believe we spend too much money on elections, but it seems difficult to make that case when political spending is objectively compared to the costs of delivering other kinds of messages. Although a 30-second Super Bowl ad cost \$1.3 million,

- The average cost of a *winning* campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives was \$674,000. (One Super Bowl ad will pay for two average *winning* House races.)
- The average cost of a *winning* campaign for the U.S. Senate was \$4.7 million. (Budweiser paid more for *two minutes* of air time to run its four "Louie the Lizard" ads than the average candidate spent to win a seat in the U.S. Senate.)

Remember, too, that the \$1.3 million is for 30 seconds of air time only, while the House and Senate costs are for air time, production costs, bumper stickers, billboards, stamps, salaries, rent, brochures, and what-have-you.

We live in a vast and populous land where (thank God) we are free to speak — and to spend money to make our speech more powerful and effective. In this blessed land — where a 30-second commercial during a football game can cost \$1.3 million — is \$674,000 too much to spend on a race for the United States House of Representatives? Is \$4.7 million too much to spend on a race for the United States Senate?

Political campaigns are not football games, but they *are* competitions of ideas and programs and values — and that competition is waged with *political speech*.

When the debate in Congress turns again to campaign finance "reform," many voters will be justifiably skeptical of claims that "we spend too much on politics" because they know that "spending" in this context is a close synonym for *speech*.

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[Data on advertising costs were taken from public sources and confirmed by the National Football League. Data on campaign costs were taken from published information of the Federal Election Commission (April 14, 1997).]